DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 113 JC 900 094

AUTHOR Griffin, Beverly Norris
TITLE How To Improve Students' Writing Styles.
INSTITUTION Shelby State Community Coll., Memphis, Tenn.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Revision (Written Composition); *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; Writing Exercises; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Instructors often criticize student writing styles in abstract, nebulous terms which further serve to alienate student writers from the concept of style. College instructors should direct students to such concise, recognized discourses on improving writing style as Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style." In these manuals, specific, effective suggestions may be found, such as "be concise," "use active verbs," "choose words carefully," and "omit unnecessary words." These guidelines will significantly improve, with minimum effort, the writing style of anyone who is not already a skilled writer. The easiest and most effective means of improving writing style is to avoid whenever possible the use of a few undesirable words which are employed too often in daily written and spoken language. These words are "it," "they," "thing(s)," "you/your," "get/got/getting," "fix/fixed/fixing," "do/did/done/doing," "that," "put," "why," "out," "up," "down," and "off." The almost effortless technique of revising sentences to eliminate these few words begins the process of developing the elusive phenomenon known as a distinctive style. (JMC)

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Beverly Norris Griffin
Associate Professor of Languages and Literature

Shelby State Community College
P. O. Box 40568
Memphis, Tennessee 38174-0568

How to Improve Students' Writing Styles

Style, a common word with which all are familiar, means . . . well, fashion of dress, mode of living, model of car. Yet what exactly does writing style mean? We have all used the term to laud--or more frequently to criticize--student writing: "Your content is excellent, but your style is . . . well, . . . awkward; it lacks smoothness; it doesn't flow." Were our writing described in these terms, would we know how to approach our inadequate writing style problem? Would we, who write professionally and certainly have far more experience with written communication than do our students, know exactly how to improve our "style"? It's doubtful, and imagine how nebulous our comments must sound to students: "lacks smoothness, is awkward, doesn't flow"!

In fact, writing style is an evasive idea to grasp, and style is most definitely difficult (and time consuming) to attempt to teach. Style is an elusive concept in our own minds, and few can deal effectively with improving the writing styles of our students, especially given students' other instructional needs: organization, development, grammar and mechanics; one could soon convince himself that improving students' writing styles is quite beyond the scope of our classroom time and obligations.

Were we as college instructors to direct our own attention or that of a student to good, recognized discourses on improving writing style (Strunk and White's The Elements of Style is among the best and the most widely referenced), specific, effective suggestings would be found. These include "be concise, use active verbs, choose words carefully, omit unnecessary words, refrain from jargon, eliminate cliches, shun euphemisms, and avoid wordiness." Thus, "all" that is necessary to develop good writing style (assuming skills in organization, development, grammar, and mechanics) is to embody in one's writing the above specific do's and don't's!

For the serious writer who wishes to undertake a prolonged but successful study of writing style, who is determined to improve his mode of expression, who takes the time and makes the effort to develop his personal, characteristic manner of expression, the suggestions for improving style included in most good discussions on the subject are all that are necessary. However, for the frequent-but-not-professional writer and for the student who needs and wishes to improve his writing but not devote much of his life to the endeavor, the following Griffinese Guidelines will significantly improve, with minimum effort, the writing style of anyone who is not already a truly skilled practictioner of written discourse. One can incorporate these simple, specific techniques and be a better writer at once.

The easiest and most effective means of improving one's style . . . in the opinion of this writer . . . also is comprised of don't's, but they are definitely not the same "do not's" found in other commentaries on improving writing style. This technique is to avoid whenever possible the use of a few undesirable words we all employ entirely too often in both our written and spoken language. These words are

it	get, got, getting	put	up
they	fix, fixed, fixing	why	down
thing(s)	do, did, done, doing	out	off
you, your	that (when possible)		

If a writer edits these few words from his written work, his style--the distinctiveness of his writing-- improves significantly . . . and assuredly, this technique is almost effortless. Soon after consciously removing these words (whenever possible) from first drafts, the write simply no longer includes them at all. At first, the effort must be conscious, but it becomes automatic.

The sentences that follow can be revised easily to avoid the words in question, and the rewritten sentences are significantly better than the originals.

Douglass knew he had the courage it would take to escape to freedom.

Douglass knew he had the courage necessary to escape to freedom.

* * *

I am returning the form to you as it requires your signature.

I am returning the form as your signature is required.

* * *

The mayor believes that violent and repeat offenders must be locked up longer.

The mayor believes violent and repeat offenders must be incarcerated (or jailed) longer.

* * *

Before spring term a ruling had come down which permitted no more than twenty-two students in a developmental class.

Before spring term a ruling was made (or disseminated) which permitted no more . . . .

* * *

By the time you get done with these assignments, you will be ready to write longer, more fully developed papers.

By the time this assignment is completed, students will be ready to write . . . .

* * *

We have made our objections known and would like to find out what effects they have had on the attitudes of those from whom the document originated.

> We have made our objections known and would like to determine what effects our concerns have had . . . .

* * *

New program development could focus on doing a needs assessment to determine if a new program should be developed at this time.

> New program development could focus on performing (or completing) a needs assessment . . . .

* * *

Politicians are out to get every thing they can.

> Politicians are interested in personal gain.

* * *

Many people never get the chance to find out what they would most enjoy doing because they are so involved with day-to-day obligations and responsibilities.

> Many people never determine what would be most personally enjoyable because of their involvement with day-to-day obligations and responsibilities.

* * *

Although improving or teaching writing style will never be made truly easy, attention to the basic premise herein explained--the avoidance of a few specific words--will definitely improve that elusive, nebulous, but frequently mentioned phenomenon . . . style!

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MAR 3 1990